

IX.

AVERILL'S RETREAT.

In December, 1863, General Averill's army suddenly appeared on the crest of the river ridge opposite Hillsboro, and covered the face of the country by straggling along routes parallel with the county roads. It was the army that a few weeks before had been victorious at Droop Mountain. Now cold, wet and starving the men were in headlong, disorganized retreat. They appeared so suddenly that the men who were at home had no opportunity to escape and were taken prisoners, and the women had no time to conceal their scanty household stores. At one place the house was ransacked, but a large quantity of maple sugar was not found. It was under a lounge, and the lady of the house had three girls calling. They sat on the lounge and spreading their skirts concealed effectively the treasured sugar.

The soldiers were practically starving. At one place they eagerly consumed all the scraps of rancid fat that had been set aside for soap grease. At another place some Dutch soldiers drank and ate from the swill tub. A woman whose husband was in the Confederate army

saw her slender supply of bacon carried away by a private soldier. An officer riding up, she appealed to him for protection. He ordered the man to leave the bacon. The soldier replied, "You be ——!" The officer immediately fired upon the soldier, who dropped the stolen meat and ran.

The men who were at home were nearly all taken. A large number of these prisoners were kept in the old Academy in Hillsboro, and the guards who were placed over them slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. A bold movement on the part of the pursuing Confederates would have captured the whole force. Not until the town of Edray was reached and news of immediate reinforcements from Beverly, did the men of Averill's command see any peace or comfort. The retreat was made from Salem to Beverly, four hundred miles, in sixteen days and in the worst weather.

The information from which this sketch is written is gathered from various sources, and we can not personally vouch for its correctness, and it is very apt to be criticised by those who were actors in these scenes. But that is the general fate of war literature. Let an old soldier write of the war, and men who have served with him will have a different version of it. It will not be until the memory of man runneth not to the contrary that a true history of the great war will be written.

General William Woods Averill was born in Cameron, N. Y., in 1832. He was graduated at West Point in 1855, and until 1857 served in the garrison at Carlisle, Pa. He then went to the frontier in the Indian

wars, where he was wounded. At the battle of Bull Run he was first lieutenant of a company of mounted riflemen. He was made colonel of the 3d Pennsylvania Cavalry later in 1861. His most notable achievements were his campaign in Virginia and his notable retreat in December, 1863, whereby he extricated his army of five thousand men from the heart of the Confederacy, was his most brilliant exploit. He attained the rank of Major General, and resigned at the close of the war. He was afterwards president of a manufacturing company. His campaign in this section made his name famous.

The "fourth separate brigade" was created March 28, 1863, and the command given to General Roberts, who fixed his headquarters at Weston. It included the all the eastern section of West Virginia, in which section were numerous Confederate sympathizers, there being probably more Confederate than Union people. This was the "bushwhacking" section of the country, there being so many deadly rifle shots, and both sides engaged in this species of unlawful warfare. Regular soldiers would at times practice it.

A staid old man (a Union soldier who has made his fortune in the west) told the writer: "Three of us lay up on the hill-side just west of the Marlinton bridge on a scout. We saw a man in Confederate uniform ride up to the end of the bridge, stop his horse and look through. We all cocked our guns and took aim, but we thought it might be a neighbor and held our fire. He turned and I saw it was an uncle of yours. I have always been glad we waited. He never knew

how near he came to being shot.”

This state of things General Roberts intended to put down, by driving the Confederates out. Jones, Jackson, and Imboden made a raid on him, and all abandoned the country to pillage, and Roberts was soon in disgrace at Washington.

May 18, 1863, Averill superseded him. His orders were to find Roberts and relieve him of his command, protect the country between the line of the Baltimore & Ohio and Kanawha River, and guard the passes in Cheat Mountain. At this time he was about thirty years old. He tried to clear the country of Confederates between Pendleton and Greenbrier.

In August he destroyed saltpetre works near Franklin. He passed through Monterey, and instead of proceeding against Staunton as Imboden expected, he came to Huntersville, where he dispersed small detachments of Confederates, capturing some arms and stores. A few days later he met a force of 2500 Confederates under General Jones at Rocky Gap, near the White Sulphur, and after fighting a day and a night was utterly routed. This was a hot fight. The cannonading was heard in Pocahontas by people who could not imagine what forces were engaged. Captain Von Koenig was killed in this battle by his own men, and two reasons are given. The one is that he had struck several of his men recently, and the other that he was killed by men who thought it was Averill. The Union forces retreated to Beverly, reaching there August 31.

On Averill's next appearance in the county the bat-

tle of Droop Mountain was fought. The Confederates fell back from Huntersville to the Levels without making a stand, but there was continual skirmishing. These Confederates were under the command of Colonel William P. Thompson, who married a Miss Moffett of this county, and who after the war became a great railway magnate of New York. The Confederate forces numbered 4000, and were under the command of Major Echols. They took their stand on the top of Droop Mountain, where the turnpike crosses. From the front it seemed impregnable. Some four or five miles distant in the Levels, Averill's 5000 men pitched their tents. From the heights of Droop Mountain the Confederate soldiers could almost see what the enemy was cooking for supper. Averill waited a day for reinforcements which did not arrive. Echols was reinforced. November 6th Averill began the battle. He sent Colonel Moore with 1000 men west to flank, while he made a show of an attack on the front and made a feint of passing to the east of the enemy down the old road around the end of Droop Mountain where the Greenbrier passes through.

The flanking detachment made a curve of nine miles and fell upon the Confederates to the west. As soon as Averill detected the confusion incident to an attack in an unexpected quarter, he hurried his men up the mountain, and on their arriving at the top the Confederate forces scattered. It moves the old Confederates to smiles to this day to think how well they ran that day after the field was lost.

It was here that Colonel Cochran of Virginia made

his famous escape. He was, apparently, in the power of a squad of Union soldiers but escaped. When asked why he had not surrendered, he said: "If they had said, 'Colonel, surrender!' I would have done so; but they yelled, 'Stop, you ——— red-headed son of a gun!' and I would not accommodate any man who used such language to me."

Averill went as far south as Lewisburg, and then went to the northern part of the State in Hampshire County. He was notified that he must make a raid to Salem, Virginia, and destroy the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad. This was sending him with a small force into a country which the Confederates held in undisputed possession. His route lay through Petersburg, Franklin, Monterey, Mt. Grove, Callahans, Sweet Sulphur Springs, and New Castle to Salem. Colonel Moore with a considerable force advanced through Pocahontas County. The march began December 8th. It was a hurry call and the horses were not all shod, and this work had to be finished on the road. Averill reached Salem just as a train load of soldiers were arriving to defend the place. His artillery forced the train to back out of the place, and he destroyed the railroad, cut the telegraph wires, and destroyed the stores. The track was torn up for sixteen miles, five bridges burned, 100,000 bushels of shelled corn, 10,000 bushels of wheat, 2000 barrels of flour, 1000 sacks of salt, 100 wagons, and much other valuable property was destroyed. Six hours were spent in this work. Having completed this work, his next business was to get out of a death trap. Averill was

hemmed in by forces under Fitzhugh Lee, Jackson, Early, and Echols, and a terrible rain setting in every stream was flooded. It was one of the memorable freshets of this section.

His object was to cross into West Virginia, striking Monroe, Greenbrier, or Pocahontas county. The first brush with the Confederates on the retreat was within eight miles of the James River Bridge, on the Fincastle and Covington turnpike. The Confederates raced for the bridge, crossed it first, but did not have time to burn it. He raced them to the next bridge, five miles farther, and the same thing happened. At the second bridge before he could get cross, Jackson's force was upon him, and Averill held the bridge at a loss of 124 men. General Early sent a formal request for his surrender, to which Averill made no reply. He crossed the Alleghanies, and so one morning when the weather was bitterly cold and the Greenbrier greatly swollen, he put his command across it and swarmed into the Levels, before the inhabitants knew there were any soldiers about. It is to be doubted if there was ever a more wretched lot of soldiers.

They were in perfect agony as they approached the Marlinton Bridge, where a road from the east joins the State road running north and south on which they were traveling. We have heard men who were carried along as prisoners say that when they passed the point where Marlinton is now built without being intercepted their spirits rose and they seemed to be immediately relieved from all fears of being captured. At Edray they camped, and so worn were they that the sentinels

could not keep awake. It is said that a hundred men could have taken the whole army. They were ready to drop with fatigue, and their powder was wet. The government recognized this as a brilliant achievement, though their escape was due to pure luck, the Confederates taking the wrong roads. The United States presented each of Averill's men with a suit of clothes and a pair of shoes to take the place of those worn out on the march.